

The Years of Adolescence Before and After World War II

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There was a war that hit our country hard. By 1941, the United States was fully involved in World War II, and many teenagers felt the devastation. Prior to World War II, teenagers were "seen and not heard". By the time World War II ended teenagers were playing a larger role in our society, influencing language, music, clothes, and even values.

One difference between Illinois teenagers today compared to those before the war is more job opportunities became available to them. Before the war, many teens were not able to find employment, and extra money was a rare. In the early 1930s, the Great Depression was in progress, causing businesses to slump and unemployment to rise. Money as well as jobs were hard to come by. However, if teenagers were lucky enough to find jobs, the money they made was usually given to the family to pay bills. During this time, President Roosevelt formed the National Youth Administration (NYA) to help various counties across the United States, one of these being St. Clair County, Illinois. The NYA was designed to help high school and college students in their local area find employment. These jobs might include library service, acting as a teacher's aide, grading papers, and cleaning city hall. The NYA program was a huge success, helping many teenagers in St. Clair County. It not only relieved the burdens of some families financially, but the teenagers also learned skills in finding their own employment to support themselves and family members.

As we look around, we see life is much different for teenagers today. Many teenagers are not worrying about where their next meal comes from; they are looking

to see how much money they have, where they are going to spend it, and what they are going to buy. Believe it or not the life of teens began changing during the war when many companies turned their efforts into making war products. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, consumers did not have much purchasing power. But as a result of all their saving, when the war ended and companies stopped making items for war, many people began buying products they had lived without. The many sacrifices they made during the preceding years resulted in an economic upsurge. It has continued to soar, and many teens are now able find jobs in the service industry. As a result many teenagers today are employed and enjoy more job opportunities than ever before.

Another difference between Illinois teenagers today and before World War II is the educational opportunities. Even prior to the NYA, another relief program, Civil Works Education Service, was started in St. Clair County, Illinois. This program was established to help unemployed adults learn skills, such as reading and writing, but to also help teenagers learn to type, sew, and cook. At this time, school took on a more important role in a teen's life unlike in the 1910s when only fifteen percent of all teenagers attended high school. Most teenagers no longer stopped their education after high school, but went on to college or a trade school. Since then education has become more important in teen life, offering many more employment opportunities. Today, more job positions require a high school diploma as well as a college degree

Yet, school is still very different for some. Before the Civil Rights Movement, all schools were segregated; no black and white teens attended school together. But fortunately in 1909 a group called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was organized, fighting numerous civil rights battles in hopes

of destroying barriers and gaining rights for blacks and other minorities. In some areas, each year competitions are still held in Illinois for teenagers to compete in various academic fields. This group has grown rapidly, and today the NAACP is one of the largest civil rights organizations in the country.

Individualism makes a major difference in teens life today, compared to life before World War II. In the 1930s and 40s individual ambition and equal opportunity for white and black, men and women was mostly non-existence. There was little individualism for most girls grew up to become mothers and homemakers. Most boys had little choice except to become fathers and support their family with their earnings. However, now, in Illinois, most parents and schools encourage girls to receive an education, follow their dreams, and become whatever they want to be.

Finally, Illinois teenagers today have different values than the generation before World War II. Today teenagers set their own standards and express their own opinions and personality. They might wear expensive designer jeans and have telephones, computers, TVs, and stereos in their own room. Today's teens are much more into "things" than the pre-World War II teen ever dreamt. Teens in the 1930s wanted to grow up too fast. Some even began smoking in public. They wanted freedom from parental control. Unfortunately, this has led to an unfavorable life for many teens. The Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program helped most teenagers in Illinois. It was introduced to the grade schools across the country in 1983, and by the early 1990s it became a permanent part of All Saints Academy. D.A.R.E targets young people, teaching them how to say "no" to drugs and alcohol, and it helps raise self-esteem for many.

Our current culture can be viewed in many different ways. Some say that the young adults today lack good values and are too self-centered. Some think the years before World War II were the "good old days" where there was little violence or disobedience. However, others think today's teenagers are in many ways better. They say teenagers today are more accepting and open to change and differences and have more choice in education, jobs, and lifestyles. [From Christopher and James Collier, *The Changing Face of American Society*; David Downing, *The Great Depression*; Deanna Hasenstable, "The NYA in St. Clair County", *Illinois History* (1983); Grace Palladino, *Teenagers*; Michelle Peterson, "Education Relief Programs in St. Clair County During the Depression," *Illinois History*, (1998); Lucy Rollin, *Twentieth Century Teen Culture by the Decade*; Rhonda Schickendanz, "Education and the Great Depression", *Illinois History* (1977); Lorie Smith, "The Paper" NAACP and Its Youth Prograjs," *Illinois History* (1983); Mary Wieland, "War in Our Schools," *Illinois History*, (1995).]